



*George Washington Flowers
Memorial Collection*

DUKE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

ESTABLISHED BY THE
FAMILY OF
COLONEL FLOWERS

A CHARGE

ON THE SUBJECT OF

Sacramental Confession,

DELIVERED BY THE

RT. REV. THOMAS ATKINSON, D.D., LL.D.,

BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF NORTH CAROLINA,

TO THE

CLERGY OF THE DIOCESE,

IN

St. John's Church, Wilmington, May 22, 1874.

RALEIGH:

DAILY NEWS PRINT, FAYETTEVILLE STREET.

1874.

A CHARGE

ON THE SUBJECT OF

Sacramental Confession,

DELIVERED BY THE

RT. REV. THOMAS ATKINSON, D.D., LL.D.,

BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF NORTH CAROLINA,

TO THE

CLERGY OF THE DIOCESE.

IN

St. John's Church, Wilmington, N. C., May 22d, 1874.



RALEIGH:

DAILY NEWS PRINT, FAYETTEVILLE STREET.

1874.



BISHOP'S CHARGE.

REV. AND DEAR BRETHREN OF THE CLERGY:

It is made by Canon the duty of every Bishop to deliver to his Clergy a Charge at least once in three years, unless prevented by reasonable cause. I have thought it a sufficient performance of that duty, to urge, in my Annual Address to the Diocesan Convention, such views of the questions arising in the progress of the Church, as seemed to me true and seasonable. One such question, however, is now pressing on us, which requires ampler discussion than would be appropriate to an Address. I shall therefore, make it the subject of a Charge.

This question is that of Sacramental Confession; that is, confession made to a Priest, with the view of obtaining Absolution, and which, it is supposed, in order to be effectual, requires the disclosure of all our sins of thought, word and deed. This is a practice, which, whether right or wrong, is fraught with such grave consequences, and is at the same time beginning to be so largely accepted, both in the Church of England and among ourselves, as to justify, perhaps to require, the Chief Pastors of the Flock of Christ to form a determinate judgment concerning it, and either to give it their distinct countenance and encouragement, or to point out plainly the grounds, on account of which they feel it their duty to discountenance it. Regarding, as I do, the practice as unauthorized and pernicious, I avail myself of this occasion and this medium of communication with you, to set forth some of the reasons which have led me to the conclusion which I have just stated.

Let me premise that the term "Confession" comprehends, in its religious sense, various spiritual acts, differing in their

quality and in their results. 1st. Confession of sin, made directly to God, all acknowledge to be a duty, and indeed a condition of pardon. Thus it is said, I John, 1st Chapter, 9th verse, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," and so, Psalm 32d, verse 5th, "I acknowledged my sins unto Thee, and mine unrighteousness have I not hid. I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." And so in many other passages of Holy Writ. Indeed, it would help very much to true repentance and to assured pardon, if we made our confessions to God more frequent, more full, and more real; if we not only would say that we have done what we ought not to have done, and left undone what we ought to have done, but would bring before Him the very instances of wrong doing, which our consciences denounce against us, the very acts in which we have offended, the very words we have spoken amiss, yea, the very defilements of our hearts, and crave His pardon for each one, distinctly and separately. As we are taught in Lev. 5: 5, "Where he the transgressor shall be guilty in one of these things, he shall confess that he hath sinned in *that*." For we are taught in I Cor., 11th Chapter, 31st verse, that, "if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged."

And again, 2dly. Confession to a minister of God is by no means to be censured, but on the contrary it is, under certain circumstances, very profitable to the soul, and therefore to be strongly recommended and even enjoined. And this comes to pass, when a person has been guilty of an offence which disquiets his conscience, and renders him uncertain as to his duty, or disqualifies him from cherishing that strengthening and comfortable trust in God's mercy through Christ, without which it is impossible to please Him.

Such seems clearly to be the teaching of Elihu, in the Book of Job, 33d Chapter, 23d verse, and of which we have the approval of God. Such was the confession of David

to Nathan, of the men of Jerusalem and Judea to John the Baptist, confessing their sins, and receiving from him instruction in order to the clearing and quieting their consciences. Such again was the confession of the Jews and Greeks at Ephesus, to St. Paul.

Confession of this sort is not only allowed, but strongly urged, by our Church in the first exhortation to the Holy Communion, and I could heartily wish it were more practiced among us, tending, as it would, to deepen the sense of sin, to break up the false peace in which too many of us live, to purify the heart and the life, and to give us a true peace, which shall sweeten life and extract the sting of death, and go with us into eternity, and dwell with us throughout eternity. Such are the benefits of confession made to God, *daily*, if need be *hourly*, and of confession made to God's ministers, specially when the conscience of a penitent is especially disquieted, and he needs special counsels and consolations.

But Sacramental Confession is something very different from these; a practice, indeed, of which I cannot say less than that, in my judgment at least, it is not edifying, b.t., on the contrary, one which exhibits an uniform and fatal tendency to the demoralization of any community where it is generally adopted.

I affirm then, 1st. That it is not Scriptural. Regular, habitual confession to God, we do read of in Holy Scripture, as exceedingly profitable and commendable. Occasional confession to a minister of God we also read of as commended in Holy Scripture, but where in that blessed Scripture do we read of *habitual* confession to any man, as commendable, or even as known and practiced? Its advocates do indeed urge the passage found in the General Epistle of St. James, 5th Chapter, 16th verse, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed." But surely the obvious meaning of this is, that, when guilty of faults, we are not to deny or

conceal them, but ingenuously to acknowledge them to any one, the Priest to the people, as well as the people to the Priest; and this is the interpretation placed on these words by the ancients generally, by St. Augustin, the greatest of them all, particularly, by the leading English Divines, such as Jeremy Taylor and Hooker, and even by the Roman Theologians, with few exceptions. No stress ought then, by any fair controversialist, to be laid on this passage in proof of Sacramental Confession. Indeed, it goes very far to disprove it, for, in urging the public confession of our faults, it disallows, or at least discourages, the private.

Another passage of Scripture on which Roman Catholic Divines rely to justify confession to a Priest, as a condition of the forgiveness of sin, is that found in St. Matt., 8th Chapter, 4th verse, where our Lord says to the leper, "Go, show thyself to the Priest."

Now, without stopping to insist on the distinction between a bodily cure, and the healing of the soul, and the precarious and inconclusive nature of an argument, which applies to the latter what is only affirmed of the former, there is a refutation of this inference which the Romish Divines have affected to draw from our Lord's words to the Leper, that admits of no reply, and no evasion, and nowhere, perhaps, is it more clearly and tersely stated than in the 2d Sermon on Repentance, in the Book of Homilies. It is there said of those who rely on these words of our Lord in support of Auricular Confession, "Do they not see that the Leper was cleansed from his leprosy *before* he was sent by Christ to the Priest, to show himself unto him?" By the same reason we must be cleansed from our spiritual leprosy, I mean our sins must be forgiven us, before we come to Confession. "What need we then to tell forth our sins into the ear of the Priest, sith they be already taken away?" Therefore, St. Ambrose says of these words, "Go show thyself to the Priest," "who is the true Priest, but He which is the Priest forever, after the order of Melchisidech?" Whereby this Holy Father

doth understand that "both the Priesthood and the law being changed, we ought to acknowledge none other Priest for deliverance from our sins, but our Saviour Jesus Christ."

Thus speaks the Homily, of which we may well say, what the 35th Article of Religion says of the Homilies generally, that they contain a Godly and wholesome doctrine, *necessary for these times*. But the Scriptural authority on which the advocates of Sacramental Confession, as they call it, (generally known, however, as Auricular Confession,) mainly rest their case, is that which they suppose themselves to find in the words written in the 23d verse of the 20th Chapter of the Gospel of St. John: "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

As my object in this Charge is to set forth, as far as I can, the true doctrine on the subject of Confession, a subject itself of large dimensions, I shall not attempt, at this time, to expound these words, except so far as they bear on that subject. It is in this relation that they are regarded by the advocates of Sacramental Confession. They interpret them as authorizing and even requiring the observance of that practice. They reason in this way: That sin needs to be remitted, that post-baptismal sin is either irremissable, (the error of the Novatians of old,) or it is to be remitted by absolution, for which the text gives the authority, but, to be remitted, it needs to be known, and to be known, it needs to be confessed. Reasoning on these principles, the Romish Divines have worked out a thoroughly consistent theory, with which their practice corresponds. They say that by these words, "whosoever sins ye remit, &c.," Christ has made the Apostles and all Priests judges upon earth, that without their sentence no man that hath sinned after baptism can be reconciled to God. But the Priests, who are judges, can give no right or unerring sentence unless they hear all the particulars they are to judge. Therefore, by Christ's law, men are bound to tell in confession all their particular sins

to a Priest The Council of Trent, therefore, anathematizes in the 1st Canon of the 14th session any one who denies that Penance is in the Catholic Church, truly and properly, a sacrament instituted by Christ Himself, for reconciling the faithful unto God, as often as they fall into sin after baptism; and by the 4th Canon of the same session the Council goes on to anathematize any one who denies that Confession is a part of Penance, and by the 6th it anathematizes any one who denies that Sacramental Confession is necessary to salvation, and by the 7th Canon any one who says it is not necessary of divine right, in the sacrament of Penance, to confess all the mortal sins which are remembered, after diligent, previous meditation, including those which are secret, *with the circumstances* which change the character of sin. Look at that! Is it not a complete system, coherent in all its parts, a well built castle, wide enough to embrace the whole family of man, with dungeons for the refractory, and chambers of rest for the submissive? But after all, is it the work of God, or of man? Is it the Gospel of Christ, or another Gospel? Surely no one who was not taught this scheme of doctrine elsewhere, would ever find it in the Scriptures. Where has Christ said that He has left men to be the judges of the consciences of their fellow-men, to assign to each act its nature and its retribution, and that these sentences He would ratify? Did He not rather say, "Be not ye called Master, for one is your Master, even Christ?" Does not St. Paul say, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant; to his own Master he either standeth or falleth."

It is not, I conceive, pressing such passages as these too far, to say that they do strongly forbid such dominion by *man* over the conscience, the feelings, the character, the conduct of his fellow-man, as the doctrine and practice of Sacramental Confession necessitate. Where that practice is thoroughly established, a confessor may be devout, may be benevolent, but he is a devout and benevolent despot. He,

surely, if any man, is a Master upon earth. And after all, how weak and unsubstantial is the ground on which this monstrous power is made to rest! For, as Bishop Taylor and others have remarked, if Christ made Priests judges, their judgment is not of the sins, but of the persons. It is not *what* sins ye remit, but *whose* sins ye remit. The inquiry is not as to the sins, but as to the repentance of him who has committed them. And therefore, it becomes the ministers of souls to know the *state* of the *penitent* and not the *nature* and *number* of *his* sins. Neither does Christ give power to punish, but to pardon, or not to pardon. And what is this power to pardon? Is it judicial, is it absolute, or is it merely declarative? For what is sin? Is it not an offence against God? Is it not a debt due to our Father in Heaven? Who can release the debt but he to whom it is due? And while reason thus speaks, and Scripture thus speaks, what say the great Christian teachers?

St. Jerome says: "God inquires not what is the sentence of the Priest, but the life of the guilty." And St. Ambrose says: "Men give their ministry in the remission of sin, but they exercise not the right of any power." "Men pray, but it is God who forgives." And so again, St. Chrysostom, Homily 28. on I Cor., says on these words of St. Paul, "Let a man examine himself," &c. He bids not one examine another, but a man himself, making the tribunal not a public one, and the conviction without a witness. And again in another Homily, commenting on the same words, he says: "St. Paul bids thee within thy own conscience, none being present but God, who knows all things, to set up a judgment and search after thy sins." St. Basil says, "I do not make confession with my lips, to appear to the world, but inwardly in my heart where no eye sees." And so St. Augustin, expounding these words of the Psalmist in Ps. 32. "I said I will confess my transgressions *unto the Lord*, and Thou forgavest the wickedness of my sin," says: "He had not yet pronounced it, but only promised that he would,

and yet God forgave him. He had not yet pronounced it, but only in his heart. His confession was not yet come to his mouth, yet God heard the voice of his heart. His voice was not yet in his mouth, but the ear of God was in his heart."

But why should I go on multiplying citations from the early Christian witnesses and expounders of the Gospel to show that they did not believe in Sacramental Confession as a condition of the pardon of sins, or as a means of grace. On that subject their doctrine was thoroughly Protestant, yet at the same time indisputably Catholic, for who would care to be more truly and distinctly Catholic than St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Augustin, of the Latin Church, St. Chrysostom and St. Basil, of the Greek? And thus it continued for 1,200 years. Grievous sins which offended the whole Church, were, for several centuries, confessed before the whole Church; sins generally were confessed only before God.

In the Oriental Church, a practice prevailed for a time, because of some scandals which public confession had occasioned, of appointing certain Priests chosen for the purpose, because silent and discreet men, and called Penitentiaries, to receive confession of sins of an atrocious nature and to guide the penitents, but this practice, after a time, was discontinued. In the mean time private confessions, although still voluntary, became more frequent. As discipline decayed crime increased, and spiritual darkness deepened, until at length, in the 13th century, at the 4th Lateran Council, the momentous step was taken of requiring confession to a Priest to be made at least once a year, as a condition of communion, and this was still more irrevocably bound on the members of the Church of Rome, by decrees and Canons enacted by the Council of Trent.

The Church of England, so far from requiring Sacramental Confession, does in effect stigmatize it by the censure which she pronounces in the 25th Article on the Sacrament

of Penance, of which Auricular Confession is an integral and most important part. And again, in the 1st exhortation in the Communion office, the Church of England clearly indicates that confession to a Priest is not only not a prerequisite to Communion, but that it ought not to be made, save only in certain exceptional cases, and then not of all sins, but only of those as to which the offender cannot quiet his own conscience. Confession to a Priest then, according to the Church of England, instead of being a regular part of spiritual discipline, is a remedy of a questionable nature, to be used only in certain abnormal cases, and then only for definite and specific ends. It has been well said, that according to the doctrine of the Church of England, a confessor, a physician of souls, is like the physician who ministers to the body; he best discharges his office when he makes it unnecessary for the patient to come to him again. Our own Church is much more guarded even than this, for, Sacramental Confession and Absolution being correlative, it omits the statement as to the benefit of Absolution, in the exhortation to the Communion, which the English Prayer-book contains, and it has withdrawn from the Priest, in the visitation of the sick, even that guarded right to absolve, which the Church of England, in certain cases, allowed her clergy. These changes in the American Prayer-book are pointed out by Mr. Carter, of Clewer, in his book on Confession, and deeply regretted by him, he being a candid, and at the same time an earnest, advocate of Sacramental Confession. They certainly indicate, very clearly, that private absolution, except in the solitary case of a criminal, under sentence of death, is, when pronounced by an American clergyman, an unauthorized and lawless act, and that Sacramental Confession being designed as a preparation for, and condition of, absolution, and this being indeed the reason of its existence, is even more pointedly opposed to the teachings of the American Church than of the English.

Is this teaching erroneous or superfluous?

In nothing, perhaps, is the wisdom of that great and illustrious body, the Anglican Church, more thoroughly justified of her loving children than this. There are greater errors in the Church of Rome than Auricular Confession, but there is no greater practical evil. For consider, 1st, how it enfeebles the conscience. The very object of conscience, the very reason of the existence of that faculty, is that men may find out right and wrong and apply this knowledge to themselves, to their own conduct, their own hearts. But this is the very office of the confessor. The confessor becomes to the penitent *his conscience*, and that conscience, which God has given him as a guide, is superseded in its functions, dethroned, set aside, and thereby enfeebled, paralyzed. It is not now the business of the man to examine himself, it is the business of the Priest to examine him. It is no longer the business of the man to judge himself, it is the business of the confessor to judge whether he has done amiss, how much amiss, and how far circumstances extenuate or aggravate his fault. Of what use, then, is conscience to the penitent, except to carry him to the Priest and to deliver him bound into the hands of the Priest? If his conscience rise up against the direction of the Priest, so much the worse for his conscience. It is ill-instructed and must be silenced. Can a better method be imagined for chaining, starving and slaying conscience; in other words, for demoralizing a man or a community, than to establish the confessional and subject men and women to it?

Again, Confession, according to the principles of this system, is to be followed by absolution, which does not merely declare, but does effectually convey, the remission of sin. Now, what a temptation does this furnish to poor human nature to indulge a sinful inclination, since the sin is so soon and so certainly to be wiped out? Is this an imaginary danger? I think that there is no reasonable doubt, that wherever Auricular Confession is an established

institution, that these sins are committed the more readily and the more frequently, because of the expectation of the benefits of absolution, *i. e.*, a certain and speedy pardon.

Again, consider the effects of Auricular Confession in the suggestion of wicked thoughts or acts to those who might have remained ignorant of them. In that respect, the "Homo Apostolicus," an approved manual for confessors in the Church of Rome, contains matters of a very dangerous, and even pernicious nature. And if it be said that there is no such peril in our own Church, my reply is, that it does exist, even with us.

There is a book called "The Priest in Absolution," designed for those who receive confessions in the Church of England, and of which there are copies in this country, a book which I have reason to believe is habitually used by at least some clergymen in this country, and which appears to be, to a certain extent, an abridged translation of the "Homo Apostolicus," not less objectionable in substance and more faulty in form, inasmuch as it is written in English, while Lignor's book is in Latin. I am compelled to believe that the general use of either would exert an unfavorable influence on the morals of any community.

Now, it may be useful to inquire how do these reasonings accord with facts. Undoubtedly the practice of Auricular Confession was introduced for the purpose of deepening devotion and purifying morals. Has it subserved that purpose, or has it not rather been a great and calamitous mistake? What is the state of morals in the countries in which Auricular Confession is, in the main, not practiced, as compared with that which we find in those countries in which it is generally observed?

In a book published by the Rev. M. Hobart Seymour, called "Evenings with the Romanists," I find some remarkable statistics, for which he cites very weighty authorities. Thus, with regard to murders committed in England, he cites the tables laid before Parliament, and published by

order of the House, in 1852, and it thus appears that the proportion of murders to the entire population of England and Wales, in 1851, was four to every million.

In Ireland, by returns laid before Parliament in 1851, the average of the committals for murder for each year during the period of the seven preceding years, was nineteen for each million of population.

In Belgium, it appears by returns laid before the King by the Minister of Justice, and published in 1852, that the number of committals for murder in each year, for a period of ten years, produces an average of eighteen murders in each million of the population. Belgium is an exceptionally moral country as compared with the other Continental countries of Europe.

He cites the statement of the administration of criminal justice in France in 1851, presented by command to the Emperor by the Minister of Justice, as showing the number of persons committed before the civil tribunal for murder in that year, and adding to that the estimated number tried before military tribunals that year, he finds that the average was thirty to each million of the population.

Not to dwell on the statistics of each country in Continental Europe, I will cite those as given by him, that apply to Naples.

He refers to Mittermaier for the criminal calendar of Naples for 1832, and gives the enormous number of one hundred and seventy-four murders for each million of the population.

With regard to another class of crimes the statement laid before Parliament by the Registrar-General of England, in his return for 1851, shows that in the London division four per cent. of the births were illegitimate. The official returns for Paris for 1850, published by the Bureau des Longitudes, give the proportion for illegitimate births in that city as thirty three per cent. And in Vienna, as shown by official tables published by the Ministerial

Secretary, the yearly average of such births from 1848 to 1851 reached the monstrous proportion of fifty-one per cent.

Compare then the moral, social and political conditon of England with that of the Continental countries to which I have referred, and it is as the healthful atmosphere of a mountain to the pestilential exhalations of a morass. I certainly do not attribute this remarkable difference exclusively to the practice of Sacramental Confession, but inas-much as this is, beyond doubt, a very powerful agency, its results clearly seem to be not favorable to the purity of morals, but tending, manifestly, in the opposite direction. Introduce Sacramental Confession into any community, and the secret of every woman who uses that instrument for disburdening the conscience is in the breast of the Priest, and she comes under his power. The secret of every man who uses it, (and they are comparatively but few,) and that man comes under his power. The Priest habitually receives confidences which neither husband, father or mother shares, and which generally ought to be trusted to none but God, alone.

I conclude, then, that Sacramental Confession is not authorized by Scripture, was unknown to the Primitive Church, is disallowed by the Church of England, except in some few jealously guarded cases, is even in those cases disallowed by the American Church, except in the single instance of a criminal about to be executed, was never required, even in the Church of Rome, until the 13th century, has been found by large and long experience to be pernicious to morals and injurious to the peace and happiness of society, and, therefore, ought by all who love this Church of ours and this country of ours to be resisted and rejected.

1875
22
1875

N. C. 204 Z99M v.1 372436
Nos.1-18

N.C. Religious Pamphlets

CALL NUMBER

Vol.

N C

1. Nos 1-18

204

Date (for periodical)

Z99M

Copy No.

N.C. 204 Z99M v.1 372436

Nos.1-18

